

A LAND CALLED ITALY

"Beyond the foothill of the Alps you reach the beginning of what is now called Italy." This is what the geographer Strabo wrote in the time of the first emperor, Augustus.

The name Italy comes from the word used by the Romans: *Italia*. But it is probably even older than that; we think it comes from a word the Greeks used, pronounced *witalia*, meaning "the land of cattle". This book is not just about a "land of cattle" but about a huge empire which stretched from the North Sea to the Black Sea and from the Atlas mountains in North Africa to the river Danube in central Europe.

Varied landscape

The story of Rome and its Empire begins with the land of Italy. It is a large country made up of different landscapes. A mountain range running north and south, the Apennines, divides the country like a backbone.

On the eastern side there is little room between these mountains and the sea. There are few natural harbors, and the soil is poor. The western side has a better climate, with a

▽ The Gran Sasso (the "Great Crag") mountain. At 9,900ft it dominates

the Apennines in central Italy and is the highest point in the peninsula.



great deal of land suitable for farming. This was the side most people wanted to settle in.

Rivers of Italy

The Tiber and the Arno rivers were very important in the history of the first people who settled in Italy. The plains around the rivers were good farming land, and the rivers themselves were used as main routes inland. The western side of Italy also has more rainfall than the east and good harbors.

In northern Italy, south of the Alps lies a huge plain with the river Po running for 350mi through it. The river brings down silt which helps make the soil fertile. The marshy land this produced on the coast of the Adriatic Sea was reclaimed during the Roman period by earth walls and drainage canals.

Rich in resources

Italy was much more wooded in early times than it is today. There were forests of larch and maple on the slopes of the Alps, and the area around Rome produced pine and beech. There was always plenty of good stone for building, as well as clay for making bricks and tiles and for pottery. The farming land was suitable for all sorts of animals – cattle, sheep, goats and horses. The Romans grew a variety of crops such as wheat, vegetables, grapes for wine and olives for eating and for their oil.

The people of Italy

The people who came to this fertile land were from all over the Mediterranean and beyond. Celtic-speaking Gauls came from beyond the Alps, and Greeks settled on the southern coasts and in Sicily, calling the land Magna Graecia ("Great Greece").

Over the centuries the Romans took over more and more neighboring countries. Eventually all the peoples in these lands became "Roman". For example, the Emperor Diocletian came from the far-off province of Dalmatia, now Yugoslavia; and the poet Martial thought of himself as a Roman even though he was born in what we now call Spain.

▷ Only about one-fifth of Italy is flat plain. The rest is mountainous or hilly. Northern Italy shares

its climate with central Europe, while the southern climate is typically Mediterranean.

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Geography of Italy

- Italian Peninsula is very mountainous
 - APENNINE Mountain range is located in the middle of the peninsula
 - ALPS to the North
 - Central portion of the peninsula contains fertile soil and plenty of fresh water
 - City of ROME was founded in the central portion
- IDEAL PLACE for the location of a city:
 1. Central location on the peninsula and in the Mediterranean Sea
 2. Located on a major river: TIBER River
 3. Good farming conditions
- PO (Venice) & ARNO (Florence) River Valleys located further to the northeast and northwest
- Fertile soils of these valleys are irrigated by the rivers that flow from the Apennines
- Italian hillsides are ideal for PASTURING
- Peninsula was also rich in TIMBER

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MINDMAP: GEOGRAPHY OF ITALY (Roman Empire)

